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Secret origins of the state: the structural basis of *raison d'état*

JUSTIN ROSENBERG

Introduction: the historical legitimization of Realism

The Italian city-state system occupies a special place in the canon of orthodox international relations.¹ For, as Martin Wight says, 'it was among the Italian powers that feudal relationships first disappeared and the efficient, self-sufficient secular state was evolved, and the Italian powers invented the diplomatic system'.² And of course this was not all they invented. In addition to the earliest modern discourse of *Realpolitik* ('Machiavelli', Carr tells us, 'is the first important political realist'³), it is in the Italian city-states that we find the first routine use of double-entry book-keeping, of publicly traded state debt, of marine insurance, of sophisticated instruments of credit (such as the bill of exchange), of commercial and banking firms coordinating branch activity across the continent, and so on. Here, too, the citizen militias gave way earliest to the mercenary armies that would later characterize European Absolutism; and within the town walls, a population given over increasingly to commerce and manufacture elaborated new forms of urban class conflict.

The list reads so much like a catalogue of modern institutions that it is almost surprising to recall that the cultural self-definition of these polities was *backward-looking*: they identified themselves with the cities of Classical antiquity, and their innovations were framed within a yearning 'to walk back into the pure radiance of the past'.⁴ The similarities between the Italian and the Greek cities are indeed striking, by no means restricted to the humanists' recovery of the Classical heritage. For the ancient cities too had developed a distinctive urban political culture and had explored a range of governmental forms—monarchy, oligarchy, tyranny, democracy—recognizable in the evolution of the Italian towns. Both systems had high rates of civic participation (linked originally in each case with a citizen militia), and both experimented with sortition and short terms of office as a means of maintaining the separation of private and public interests in the state. In exalting the political community as the highest end of public morality, both elaborated secular ideologies which contrasted with the cosmological self-understanding of the hierarchical poli-

¹ I am grateful to Simon Bromley and Fred Halliday for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² Wight, *Power Politics* (Leicester, 1986), p. 30. This is a fleeting reference. Neither Wight, nor Bull, nor Hinsley gives any systematic consideration to the question of what the conditions of this (by their own account) world-historical development might have been.

³ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (London, 1946), p. 63.

⁴ Petrarch, cited in Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1974), p. 149.

tical formations which surrounded them. Both embraced and depended upon trading networks focused on maritime commerce, for which both developed extensive bodies of maritime law. Above all for our purposes, both constituted miniature state-systems.⁵ The classical world had no precedent for standing diplomacy, but it appears to furnish a wealth of example and reflection—notably in the writings of Thucydides—upon the rights and wrongs of state behaviour, the emergent balances of geopolitical competition within a multipolar system, and the elaboration of diplomatic institutions for regulating interstate conflict in the face of threats from outside the system. It was, and remains, the only known historical site of a premodern discourse of *raison d'état*.⁶

On the face of it, this paradoxical contrast may be a common enough feature of historical change. Marx referred to a 'process of world-historical necromancy':

just when [people] appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language.⁷

But for students of international relations, the dual identity of the Italian city-states—dawn of the modern, echo of the ancient world—necessarily bears an added significance. For it brings us face to face with that appearance of trans-historical continuity between state-systems of vastly differing social structure which Realism draws upon to support its claims for the geopolitical realm as *sui generis*.

These Realist historical credentials have led something of a charmed life within the discipline. They are rarely challenged—perhaps because the 'timelessness' of the Renaissance and Classical civilizations is taken so much for granted throughout the humanities. Shakespeare, wrote his friend, Ben Jonson, 'was not of an age but for all time!'. And what reader today could deny the same of Thucydides? Is not the arresting 'modernity' of his prose precisely evidence of a timeless logic of inter-state behaviour which forms the natural and distinctive starting point for IR theory? How else is it to be accounted for?⁸

The ease with which these points follow on from each other perhaps explains (and in turn is explained by) what seems at first a more puzzling circumstance: namely the

⁵ Less commonly remarked is the reappearance in strength of another prominent classical institution: slavery. Denys Hay (*Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (London, 1966), pp. 374–5) suggests that in fourteenth-century Genoa, slaves may have accounted for 10 per cent of the population. However, as Anderson emphasizes, these tended to be domestic servants, slave labour in production being confined to the overseas sugar plantation and mining colonies (*Absolutist State*, p. 151).

⁶ Wight asks (without finding any answer) whether certain schools of thought in the China of the Warring States could provide another example. See his *Systems of States* (Leicester, 1977), p. 39.

⁷ 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in *Surveys from Exile* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 149.

⁸ It is not at all obvious that the seeming familiarity of Italian and Greek geopolitics derives primarily from the condition of a plurality of sovereignties which they share with our own system. Consider the following. In the first third of the eleventh century, the collapse of the Caliphate of Cordoba in the Iberian peninsular yielded 20 to 30 Moslem successor states (the *taifa* kingdoms) which proceeded to spend several hundred years wheeling and dealing, fighting each other, making alliances, organizing geopolitical balances and so on. But no one produces studies of the *taifa* state-system. Conversely, when the Absolutist states of early modern Europe sought to redefine their sovereign powers, they revived and modified the legal codes of a long-dead *empire*: Rome. Whatever it is that we recognize as 'modern' in Rome but not in Moslem Spain, it cannot be 'anarchy'. On grounds of straightforward empirical consistency therefore, the Realist claim that the latter captures what is most distinctive and fundamental to our own modern geopolitics is rather suspect.

paucity within IR of actual historical research into these premodern geopolitical systems. Behind the countless casual references to the Italian and Greek city-states, there lies no corpus of historical analysis and debate within IR. (Elsewhere, of course, there is plenty, but in most cases it is not focused theoretically on 'the international question'.) A couple of dry, legalistic surveys by Wight, the odd chapter or article here and there on Greek or Italian *political theory*, two or three dusty volumes sleeping peacefully on library shelves marked 'History of International Law'—is this really all there is? Whatever other research has been done, it certainly keeps a very low profile. This is not a live issue in international relations theory. But it ought to be.

What if Northern Italy did *not* see the genesis of the modern international system? What if Thucydides did *not* offer a balance of power explanation of the Peloponnesian War? And what if the existence of an 'autonomous realm of the political', which indeed characterizes all three cases, can be shown to have rested *not* on their shared 'external' identity as state-systems but rather on an internal (and in each case different) structural configuration of social relations? The answer is that this may not be just a little local difficulty with dispensable historical precedents: it may bear directly on the adequacy of the dominant Realist theory of the *modern* system. For it would show that this theory lacks the historical definition to which it pretends. And ahistorical theories in the social sciences tend to suffer two persistent and debilitating liabilities. First, they have no means of testing whether properties assumed to be universal are in fact specific to a particular (usually contemporary) epoch. This blots with anachronisms their image of the past. Second, without an historical depth of field there is always the danger of posing as irreducible, essential starting points, aspects of the modern world which are themselves outcomes requiring explanation. Behind the veil of familiarity, the present too goes unexplained. In the case of Realism, historical examples work precisely to stress the irreducibility of its starting point (the autonomy of the political/the autonomous state), preempting further analysis by demonstrating its elemental, transhistorical character. As Halliday has pointed out, it is 'indeed paradoxical that a concept so central to the whole discipline should escape explication as this one has'.⁹ For what if the autonomy of the political is itself a contingent historical development? Would that not mean that a crucial dimension of the modern system was opaque to Realism? And would we not then stand in pressing need of an alternative explanation of the undoubted similarities between the Classical, Renaissance and modern systems?

The aim of this paper then, is partly to call the Realist bluff by taking a closer look at these premodern geopolitical systems: can we trust the historical references, or are they hiding something? It will be argued in this connection that the historical terrain often regarded as the stronghold of Realism is actually the site of its most spectacular failures.

The argument is set out in the following manner. First, the early development of the Italian city-state system is briefly reviewed, particular attention being given to the emergence of a distinct public political sphere. This, it is suggested, was crucially linked with the articulation of a discourse of *raison d'état*. The next section recalls Marx's discussion of the structural conditions of the rise of such a 'purely political state'; and the paper then turns to consider how these conditions came to obtain in the Italian case—through processes extending deep into the feudal world surrounding

⁹ Halliday, 'State and Society in International Relations: A Second Agenda', *Millennium*, 16, 2 (1987), p. 217.

the city-states. This makes it possible to assess broadly the supposed Italian origins of the modern system, before moving on to explore the structural basis of the 'purely political' sphere in Classical Athens. Here again, the emergence of a recognizable discourse of *raison d'état* is traced not to the multipolarity of the geopolitical order, but to the structural configuration of social relations organizing the material reproduction of the society—in particular, the remarkable interdependence of democracy and slavery; and this alternative analysis is then used to challenge the common association of Thucydides with the Realist theory of the balance of power.

But the primary purpose is constructive; and it should perhaps be stressed again at the outset that the final destination of the argument is neither Italy nor Greece but rather our own modern international system whose actual historical identity is effaced by the too easy rehearsal of transhistorical similarities. For if the generic properties of states-systems will not suffice to explain the familiarity of Italy and Greece then, as already suggested, they lose their credibility also as a starting point for understanding the modern world. For this reason, the perspectives used below to explore the premodern cases are, in the Conclusion, turned on the modern international system itself in order to draw out their implications for IR theory in general. In short, it is not enough to perform the usual exposé and walk away. To secure the ground we must pursue our methodological critique into the sketching of an alternative historical explanation. We must give our own answer to the riddle of historical appearances. And it must be a better one.

Italy

Political development of the commune

The independence of the medieval towns of northern Italy had been secured at a very general level by the repulse of two German Imperial attempts to unify the peninsula under feudal monarchy. In 1160 the citizen militias of the Lombard League defeated the army of Frederick I (Barbarossa). In the following century his grandson, attacking from Sicily, set in chain the events leading to the complete destruction of Hohenstauffen power in Italy. Both these campaigns assumed the form of the struggle between Empire and Papacy.¹⁰ None the less, as Anderson suggests, it was a cross-cutting dynamic, the precocious economic development of northern Italy, which proved decisive in their outcome.¹¹ Florence supplied not only troops for the papal cause: its merchants raised the enormous loans which funded the Angevin mercenary army that destroyed Frederick. In the decades which followed, French rule fractured in the south (the Sicilian Vespers of 1282), while the papacy first removed to Avignon (1309), returning in 1377 only to disable itself yet further by the Great

¹⁰ The Communes were by no means united in their hostility to the Empire. Many of them had, after all, sealed their independence from episcopal rule by winning Imperial recognition of their autonomy. See D. Waley, *The Italian City-Republics*, 3rd edn (London, 1988), pp. 32–4. And the Papal-Imperial contest would continue to provide the ideological form—though decreasingly the actual content—of both geopolitical and internal factional conflicts for many years to come. On the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, see Waley, *City-Republics*, pp. 145–56, who also gives instances where this diplomatic partisanship continued to have a very real material basis—e.g. Florentine Guelfism (p. 148).

¹¹ Anderson, *Absolutist State*, p. 143.

Schism of the following year. Outside intervention and influence in northern Italy by no means ceased at this point, and the Ottoman threat in the east grew alarmingly in the following century; but with the drastic weakening of both Papacy and Empire in the peninsula, and France distracted by the Hundred Years War, the region enjoyed a geopolitical seclusion that would last up until the French invasion of 1494. Thereafter, the substantive independence of the city states was submerged again, first under French then Hapsburg domination. It was the intervening 'Golden Age' (e.g. 1378–1494) which saw the innovation, along with much else, of 'the system of organising interstate relationship(s) which Europe later adopted'.¹²

The complex of political communities which achieved this had of course already undergone an extensive process of development by the time of the Great Schism. At the start of the thirteenth century there were some two to three hundred more or less independent communes: towns which had shaken off episcopal authority (mostly in the seven decades up to 1150) and constituted themselves under the consular system as self-governing merchant/landowning oligarchies.¹³ Their numbers had already diminished considerably, as the combined effects of internal political instability, competition over rural hinterlands and trade routes, and the inability to meet the rising minimal military conditions of survival gave opportunity for expansion and absorption. The twelfth century in particular saw an accelerated process of combined external consolidation (the assertion of communal authority in the *contado*, or rural hinterland) and evolution of internal political institutions.

Under these conditions the city-state system underwent not just a geopolitical reorganization but also a decline of the consular political form. The consulates had proved unstable in part because the leading merchant families which composed both the commercial and the political elites carried their factional rivalry into the institutions of town government already under pressure from the small-trader and artisanal class below. The measures taken by the citizens' assemblies to preempt the chronic risk involved in this arrangement constitute perhaps the single most remarkable—and certainly the most revealing—aspect of the political development of the commune. Terms of office were shortened (sometimes to as little as two months as in the case of the *priori* making up the ruling council in Florence,¹⁴ more usually to six months or a year)—with incumbents being ineligible (along with their entire families) for immediate re-election. The representative character of key elections was persistently diluted by adding in sortition rounds.¹⁵ Legislative initiative was dispersed among a multitude of committees. And the highest judicial and military offices—the *podesteria* (judge) and *capitaneria* (army commander)—were banned to native residents altogether: their terms usually restricted to six months, they were filled by candidates from outside who were rigorously vetted for remoteness of interest and blood, and then tightly sequestered for the length of their office in order to preserve their neutrality.¹⁶

¹² Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 65.

¹³ The ruling groups of the early communes were the major landholders; the later rise of trade did not produce a landless commercial bourgeoisie (an index perhaps of the very weakness here of seigniorial power). By contrast with the cities of northern Europe, 'the quintessential burgher . . . is not identifiable' in Italy (Waley, *City Republics*, p. 118).

¹⁴ G. Holmes, *Europe: Hierarchy and Revolt 1320–1450* (London, 1975), p. 81.

¹⁵ The procedure for the election of the Venetian Doge comprised no less than five sequent ballots, each one (except the last) immediately stymied by a further selection by lot. See Hay, *Europe*, p. 120, and the further examples, Waley, *City Republics*, p. 37.

¹⁶ See Waley, *City Republics*, pp. 42–3.

In short, and albeit with considerable variation in detail and extent between individual towns, the communes attempted to insulate government from the *private* power of individuals, to reconstitute the sphere of political life as an autonomous *public* realm, to separate out the state as an institution: the *podesta* 'was not a ruler, but rather he stood for the rule of law'.¹⁷

The public realm opened up by these developments was of course a restricted one. Citizenship did not extend to the *contado*, where a subject population was compelled to deliver monies, foodstuffs and military service to the commune. The abolition of serfdom in the *contado* often signalled only the completion of communal domination; in some ways indeed the towns were not so much anti-feudal as 'urban modalities of the general mechanism for surplus extraction typical of the age, directed against competing rural practitioners'.¹⁸ But the distinctive institutional form of the commune did none the less have significant external aspects. One of these is captured in Sereni's observation that 'Italian wars generally assumed the character of public wars, that is, of real conflicts between states, while private wars were still very frequent in the rest of Europe'.¹⁹ What is a public war? Perhaps an acceptable definition would be: one undertaken by or on behalf of a community, in which the goals pursued or threats responded to concern collective interests. In a public war, the corporate interests of the community (however these are ascertained) are assumed in principle to be the highest moral end. It is therefore legitimated by *raison d'état* in a way that private wars cannot be. And private warfare does not refer only to the prosecution of *défiance* by nobles. Any conflict formally undertaken in pursuit of individual material and political aggrandizement is a private war. In this sense, even wars between medieval monarchs remained private: their legitimation took the form of dynastic claims (often appealing also to religious sanction); and the laws of war significantly pertained to the conduct of individuals rather than collectivities such as states.²⁰ This gives rise to something of a paradox. In the course of a rivetting passage in *Renaissance Diplomacy*, Garrett Mattingly declares that

in Italy, power was temporal in the strictest sense of the term. It was naked and free, without even the most tenuous connection with eternity . . . [The communes were] the first omniscient, amoral, sovereign states.²¹

By 'naked power' he refers mainly to the fact that the internal political constitution of the commune was secular, wearing no sanction of religious legitimacy such as adorned the hierarchical structures of the surrounding feudal world. Mattingly is of course right to stress the permanent internal instability of the communes; but the additional suggestion that brute force predominated in Italy as the irreplaceable support of illegitimacy is slightly misleading. Was noble power in the countryside any less brutal? And in one respect at least, was not the religious legitimation of feudal domination required precisely by its *private* character, which otherwise would indeed have appeared more 'naked' (in the sense of arbitrary and particularistic) than the

¹⁷ Waley, *City-Republics*, p. 43.

¹⁸ Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London, 1974), p. 192.

¹⁹ A. Sereni, *The Italian Conception of International Law* (Columbia, 1943), p. 42.

²⁰ '... medieval treaty law was usually contained in the glosses and commentaries on contract law . . . individuals rather than sovereign states were the principal subjects of international law . . .' J. L. Holgreffe, 'The Origins of Modern International Relations Theory', *Review of International Studies*, 15 (1989), pp. 13–14.

²¹ Mattingly, *Diplomacy*, p. 53.

internal political structures of the commune? (It is estimated that fully one third of the free residents of the communes may have participated actively in the politics and administration of their towns each year—a proportion equivalent to that in Athens.²²) The real point is that the ‘naked’ power that requires no religious sanction may be despotic or usurpatious: or it may be *public power*, morally self-sufficient because it appeals to an arena, real or ideal, of common interests.²³ One index of this possibility in Italy is the vigorous attachment to the rule of law, which also had an external aspect: the cities agreed to continue observance of the municipal (cosmopolitan) law of the Empire even after Imperial authority waned: ‘When the Emperor was no longer recognised as superior, his place was taken by the law’.²⁴ We shall return to these themes below.

The standing embassies of later renown did not arise on a significant scale until the latter half of the fifteenth century; but organized diplomatic interaction between the communes was continuous and intense from the start. So much so, indeed, that Waley suggests that ‘the Commune of 1200 may be considered essentially the product of such [external] relations’.²⁵ In at least one sense this was often literally true: the military efforts required both to suppress feudal power in the *contado* and to secure new boundaries against attack from other Communes ‘multiplied expenditure, hence revenue’ and were ‘the main force which matured the cities’ fiscal institutions’.²⁶ But beyond this, the material and organizational reproduction of the Communes was carried on in significant part through their peacetime interaction by trade and joint political coordination. The growth of traffic between the cities called forth and was fostered by treaties extending reciprocal guarantees of the safety of communications, the civil rights of foreign merchants and arrangements for extradition. Cities negotiated about bilateral tariff concessions, the material facilities (warehouses etc.) to be made available to each other’s traders, the procedures for the settlement of private disputes and so on. This in turn promoted an expansion of the apparatus of government in general, and in particular required an ‘exact determination of the frontiers between the different states’, leading often in turn to the appointment of ‘magistrates charged with maintaining the boundaries’.²⁷ Thus, by a symbiotic process familiar to students of later Absolutist Europe, the heightened surveillance within communal territories, which produced a sharpening of the territorial form of the state, was increasingly both a function and a precondition of intercourse between Communes.²⁸

By the start of the thirteenth century, ‘the *podesta* had become the rule rather than the exception’.²⁹ Yet it was from the beginning a precarious settlement. The town nobles continued their violent feuding from their towers or from the exile where they were not infrequently despatched in large groups. The tensions between the nobles and the *popolo* could break out into open warfare. And to add to the manifold

²² Waley, *City-Republics*, p. 68.

²³ For a brief but pregnant discussion of the operation of religious legitimation in hierarchical modes of domination, see Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 83.

²⁴ Cited in Sereni, *International Law*, p. 14.

²⁵ Waley, *City-Republics*, p. 88.

²⁶ Waley, *City-Republics*, p. 49.

²⁷ Sereni, *International Law*, p. 11.

²⁸ Giddens observes the simultaneous and interlinked emergence of domestic and international political structures with respect to the rise of the nation-state. See especially, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Cambridge, 1985), chapter 4.

²⁹ Waley, *City-Republics*, p. 42.

sources of inter-communal hostility, the peninsula as a whole was still (for the first half of the century) disturbed by the intervention of Emperor and Pope. Many Communes were increasingly obliged to place themselves under the military protection of local feudal lords. Even Florence, which retained its republican institutions well into the fifteenth century, passed in and out of the protection of outside powers no less than three times between 1313 and 1343.³⁰ Elsewhere, the result was the rise of the *signori*—often feudal magnates whose access to rural military and agrarian resources supplied the leverage at a moment of crisis to transform their tenure of *podesteria* or *capitaneria* into a permanent executive position.

The great republic of Milan fell to the Visconti just before the turn of the century,³¹ and by the 1320s the *signori* held power throughout most of the system.³² This development further hastened the territorial concentration of the city-states while at the same time arresting their political evolution. But it did not represent a straightforward reassertion of rural feudal power: the towns were now a curious amalgam of merchant and noble forms. As Salzer put it: 'in the *Signoria* the two political principles which had so long fought one another in Italy, Municipalism and Feudalism [were] joined together'.³³ And to a greater or lesser extent, *signori* found that they had to rule through republican institutions.³⁴ In the most remarkable instance of sustained political autonomy, the effective rule of Cosimo de Medici over Florence for three decades barely rippled the surface of republican government: the private economic power by which he maintained his influence in the committees provided the perfect counterpoint to the public sphere which he manipulated with such skill.³⁵

Sources of political autonomy

The word 'autonomous' has been used above to describe the emergence of Communal political institutions. This is a loaded term in the literature of International Relations: what exactly is meant by it here? It may help in answering this question to compare Communal institutions with those characterizing the predominant, seigniorial form of political power. For the most striking contrast is precisely that in the latter case economic activity and the exercise of political authority are *not* separated out. The heritable fief typically *combines* personal rights of appropriation over land and productive labour with extensive political jurisdiction. On the one hand, the fief is 'owed' to the liege lord not as a public office but as a personally contracted possession; on the other, it carries rights of economic exploitation which can be

³⁰ Holmes, *Europe: Hierarchy*, pp. 81–2.

³¹ Matteo Visconti secured the Imperial Vicariate in 1294 (Hay, *Europe*, p. 167).

³² Among the exceptions were Venice and Florence, which had expanded sufficiently to secure their own defences.

³³ Cited in Waley, *City-Republics*, p. 158. For a discussion of the formal survival of republican institutions, see Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (New York, 1979), pp. 102ff.

³⁴ Martines observes that 'For all their original violence, *signori* knew that they could endure only by regularising procedures and affecting to side with the rule of law. . . . The major legislative bodies survived in nearly all the cities that fell subject to signorial rule' (*Power and Imagination*, p. 103).

³⁵ Cosimo held supreme public office for only three two-month terms during the entire period of his ascendancy. Heider & Waley, *A Short History of Italy* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 85.

exercised only through mechanisms of political command and subordination—serfdom. There are thus no distinct ‘political’ and ‘economic’ realms. The emergence of a public political sphere is blocked by the particularist, private character of ‘parcellized sovereignty’; and the ‘purely economic’ relationships which constitute the fabric of an ‘economy’ in the modern sense are precluded by the politically unfree status of rural labour.

There is also therefore no state in the modern sense. There is a degree of intransigent regulation provided by royal suzerainty; and there are more or less concerted attempts to expand the scope of royal authority through the system of courts and the contesting of ecclesiastical prerogative. There are legal codes and attempts to consolidate centralized political rule. But ‘there is as yet no political constitution as distinct from the actual material state or the other content of the life of the nation’.³⁶ Nothing could be more emblematic of this fusion than the role assumed by dynastic diplomacy as a mechanism of accumulation and expansion in the geopolitics of the age. This institution visibly depends for its operation upon the inseparability of personal property and political jurisdiction—depends, that is, on the non-existence of an autonomous state. Several other resultant peculiarities of feudal ‘political’ power are frequently remarked—the recognition of private rights of warfare,³⁷ the absence of a distinct body of public international law and so on.³⁸ One might add that in this period the very reference of the term ‘the state’ was different, denoting something closer to ‘the civil state’ later contrasted with ‘the state of nature’. The modern sense, a public political organization contrasted with ‘civil society’ is a much later arrival again.³⁹

Marx was from the earliest in no doubt that the social transformations registered in the distance between these couplets—e.g. the emergence and reproduction of the ‘autonomous’ state on the one hand and the ‘non-political’ civil society on the other—had to be seen as structurally interdependent:

*The establishment of the political state and the dissolution of civil society into independent individuals—whose relations with one another depend on law, just as the relations of men in the system of estates and guilds depended on privilege—is accomplished by one and the same act.*⁴⁰

As Derek Sayer has argued, Marx’s early writings repeatedly focus on the links between the dominant mechanisms of surplus appropriation characteristic of the new ‘civil society’ and this reconstitution of political power as public authority.⁴¹ In particular, Marx stresses that so long as the material reproduction of a social order is organized through institutionalized political subjection, ‘politics’ cannot be disengaged from privilege. Under these conditions, ‘the unity of the state, and also the consciousness, will and activity of this unity, the general power of the state, are likewise bound to appear as the *particular* affair of a ruler’.⁴² It is only when ‘the

³⁶ Marx, ‘Critique of Hegel’s *Rechtsphilosophie*’, reprinted in D. Sayer (ed.), *Readings from Karl Marx* (London, 1989), p. 116.

³⁷ See Holzgrefe, ‘Origins’, p. 12.

³⁸ Sereni, *International Law*.

³⁹ For an illuminating discussion of the historical evolution of the concept of society, see David Frisby and Derek Sayer, *Society* (London, 1986), ch. 1.

⁴⁰ ‘On the Jewish Question’, reprinted in Sayer (ed.), *Readings*, p. 125.

⁴¹ See for example, D. Sayer, ‘The Critique of Politics and Political Economy: Capitalism, Communism and the State in Marx’s Writings of the mid-1840s’, *Sociological Review*, 33 no. 2 (1985).

⁴² Sayer (ed.), *Readings*, p. 124.

political character of civil society is abolished (substituting non-political mechanisms of surplus appropriation) that politics can assume a general, autonomous form in the state, replacing the particularist private form of the estates. The overthrow of feudalism

set free the political spirit, which had been, as it were, split up, partitioned and dispersed in the various blind alleys of feudal society. It gathered the dispersed parts of the political spirit, freed it from its intermixture with civil life, and established it as the sphere of the community, the *general* concern of the nation, ideally independent of those *particular* elements of civil life.⁴³

Given the widespread assumption in IR (and elsewhere) that Marxism comprises a theory of civil society which is incapable of apprehending the state except in instrumentalist or reductionist terms, these passages are truly remarkable. For what is being discussed here except the very state autonomy which, generalized into a universal feature of political organisation, forms the cornerstone of Realist theory? 'The political spirit' can be nothing other than *raison d'état* (an idiom indeed foreign to the political discourses of feudalism). And these phrases—the general power of the state . . . the political state . . . a real state . . . the state as such . . . the state [as] a separate entity, beside and outside civil society'⁴⁴—would not seem out of place on the lips of E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, or any other writer arguing for 'the autonomy of the political'. The difference of course is that Marx does not regard this autonomy as an attribute of institutions of rule *sui generis*; any exercise of government includes general social functions and mobilizes collective powers; but the emergence of a 'purely political' sphere is an historical development which rests upon a determinate structural configuration of social relations. Furthermore, this is not to be understood simplistically as a causal autonomy of the state as an organization: it does not follow that once a public political sphere has emerged, some imputed universal properties of statehood could then provide a self-sufficient basis of *substantive* explanation of historical outcomes. On the contrary, this is a theory of 'the autonomy of the political' which *begins* by grounding our analysis of the state in a conception of the social totality.

Italy and Europe

Is this then what was happening inside the walls of the Italian towns—and if so, does it not merely confirm the conventional image of northern Italy as the advance guard of the emerging modern states-system? This question requires that we supplement our account of the internal characteristics of the Italian system with some observations on its external integration into the wider social formation.

For the temporary *geopolitical* isolation of northern Italy from feudal Europe in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries does not, of course, mean that the development of the city-state system took place in a vacuum. Rather the opposite is true. Any attempt to picture what followed as the unfolding of 'a little world by itself',

⁴³ Sayer (ed.), *Readings*, p. 124.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the last three of these, drawn from the same texts, see Sayer, 'Critique of Politics', pp. 230–3.

an independent and self-contained system, would be drastically misleading.⁴⁵ For the city-states were at the very hub of the wheel of medieval medium- and long-distance commerce. They virtually monopolized East–West trade, in large part through their entrepôts in the eastern Mediterranean (Venice) and the Black Sea (Genoa). And these entrepôts were not precarious footholds in a hostile, alien environment. In some cases they were substantial territorial possessions in Asia Minor, continuously sanctioned by diplomatic recognition within a thriving east Mediterranean state-system.⁴⁶

Venice had already been the principal conduit of western trade with Byzantium and the Levant in the ninth century.⁴⁷ (Formally still under Byzantine rule, she was far better placed to penetrate eastern trade than were her rivals.⁴⁸) It was, however, the Crusades, with their fantastic opportunities for carrying and booty, which gave the cities their chance. After the First Crusade (1096) Genoa, which had led the way in providing direct naval assistance, acquired one third of the city of Caesaria and the right to trade without duties and levies throughout the Crusader kingdoms.⁴⁹ In the century which followed, the Venetian colony of merchants in Constantinople grew to number some ten thousand [sic] individuals.⁵⁰ In the latter half of the twelfth century, however, this tremendously lucrative trade was beset with crisis.⁵¹ The combination of increased competition among European carriers at Byzantium and Alexandria (forcing up supply prices) with persistent debasement of coinage by the European monarchs (reducing the value of sales) produced a gradual squeeze on profits. Saladin restored Moslem control over Palestine and Syria—leaving only a narrow coastal strip to the Crusaders, (dependent upon Italian naval support), and provoking a further reduction in trade due to papal bans on commercial intercourse between Christians and Moslems. Finally, the Venetian traders at Constantinople were enduring rising levels of violent resentment from their Byzantine competitors as (Greek) Imperial protection weakened.

⁴⁵ Hill's phrase, *A History of Diplomacy in the International Development of Europe*, Vol. I (London, 1911), p. 359. Butterfield similarly allows that for many commentators 'the states of the Renaissance . . . formed a neat closed area . . . an arena of limited size . . . a field of interacting forces such as can be envisaged for the most part in isolation.' H. Butterfield and M. Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations* (London, 1966), p. 133. K. Holsti's *International Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, 1988 edition), rare in giving systematic comparative attention to the premodern systems, concurs in the restriction of the discussion to northern Italy. This reflects a broader weakness in his methodology: like Wight, he accepts the territorial self-definition of the city-states as constituting the 'boundary' of the system and hence as defining the scope of empirical study. As a result, the crucial insertion of the city-states into the wider formation of feudal Europe slips through the net of his analysis. Mattingly's gripping history, by concentrating on the emergence of ambassadors, has this same disadvantage. And viewed from the other side of the Alps, this geopolitical isolation has a similarly deceptive effect: Renaissance Italy is one of the stranger silences of M. Mann's *Sources of Social Power* (Cambridge, 1986).

⁴⁶ The lack of a common culture does not appear to have inhibited the growth of a flourishing 'international society' in the eastern Mediterranean at this time: 'It must be especially stressed that Italian states attributed more or less the same legal value to agreements concluded with Mohammedan sovereigns as to those concluded with Christian states . . . ' (Sereni, *International Law*, p. 28). On the contrary, all the cultural and political authority of the Church itself seems to have been unable to suppress Christian intercourse with the Moslem world: 'This constant repetition of ecclesiastical prohibitions was an indication of the laxity with which they were observed' (ibid.).

⁴⁷ Waley, *City-Republics*, p. 8.

⁴⁸ F. Braudel, *The Perspective of the World*. Vol. III of *Capitalism and Civilisation 15th–18th Centuries* (London, 1984), p. 109.

⁴⁹ H. Adelson, *Medieval Commerce* (New York, 1962), p. 74.

⁵⁰ Waley, *City-Republics*, p. 28.

⁵¹ For the following, see Adelson, *Commerce*, pp. 76–7.

Relief came with the Fourth Crusade, culminating in the fall of Constantinople in 1204. For the leading Italian city-states, the spoils gained by their participation in this operation were nothing short of spectacular. Genoa founded the entrepôt city of Caffa on the Black Sea and was granted in addition 'vast neighbouring lands which were veritable colonies'.⁵² Venice won (though, significantly, chose not to take possession of) three-eighths of the territory of the Byzantine Empire and secured not just monopoly rights but also the indirect rule of Constantinople for the next fifty years.⁵³ Venice and Genoa were to fight bitter naval wars over the next 100 years for control of the eastern trade. But their prize was itself dependent upon a temporary and shifting geopolitical conjuncture. In the following (fourteenth) century, direct trading communication with the far East was broken with the collapse of the Mongol Khanates. The diversion of this commerce into the hands of moslem seafarers produced a further great increase in prices. As the Ottomans extended their sway in Asia Minor, (finally capturing Constantinople in 1452), their fiscal demands further depressed an East–West traffic which was already contracting due to the ravages of the Black Death (apparently brought from Caffa by Genoese sailors) and renewed papal restrictions on trade. A further, though temporary, challenge came from the Portuguese, with the opening up of the sea-routes to the East: 'In 1504 when the Venetian galleys arrived in Alexandria . . . they found not a single sack of pepper waiting for them'.⁵⁴

And yet the East–West trade was only one of four major axes on which the integration of the city-states into the wider European social formation turned. A second was their own production of manufactures—most saliently, textiles—for sale both in Northern Europe and in the East. The livelihood of the tens of thousands of artisans and labourers depended upon concentrating 'the thinly spread demand of an entire continent'.⁵⁵ And yet it remained the case that '[t]he Italians traded in other people's products at least as much as their own'.⁵⁶ And their industrial production itself remained to the end in the service of trade.⁵⁷ Thus, thirdly, colonies of Italian merchants could be found in cities and towns all over Europe and the Levant. Ralph Davis notes that 'In every considerable trading city south of the Baltic coastlands, Italian trading settlements had been established—and there were no corresponding northern settlements in Italy'.⁵⁸ These merchants were often factors, or branch agents, of companies based in Italy which coordinated a range of transactions in different parts of the continent. (By 1300 the sedentary merchant had come to predominate over his itinerant forbear.⁵⁹) They represented a network of contacts through which

⁵² Sereni, *International Law*, p. 22.

⁵³ Sereni, *International Law*, pp. 19–20.

⁵⁴ Braudel, *Perspective*, p. 143. The Portuguese, however, never established effective control over supply in the Far East. And, in addition, Levantine demand for European products such as copper helped divert the flow of eastern spices back into their old caravan routes (Kristof Glamann, 'European Trade 1500–1750' in C. Cipolla (ed.), *The Fontana Economic History of Europe: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Glasgow, 1974), pp. 478–9). Hence, by the middle of the century, the Levant trade, measured by volume, had returned to its old levels. See J. H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance* (London, 1973), p. 69.

⁵⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century', in Trevor Aston (ed.), *Crisis in Europe* (London, 1965), p. 16.

⁵⁶ Holmes, *Hierarchy*, p. 71.

⁵⁷ Braudel avers of Venice, 'Probably the leading industrial centre in Europe', that 'The primacy of commercial capitalism over industrial capitalism until at least the eighteenth century is not seriously challenged' (*Perspective*, p. 136).

⁵⁸ Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies* (London, 1973), pp. 26–7.

⁵⁹ Waley, *City-Republics*, p. 23.

large sums of money could be raised and financial credits transferred across long distances without requiring the physical movement of specie. The bill of exchange, (which could be issued and redeemed in different currencies) was the expression of this facility through which 'to a large extent [they] dominated European trade'.⁶⁰ There was, fourthly, an additional call on the liquidity available through these means: Italian merchants/bankers (especially Florentine) handled the transfers involved in the continent-wide activity of the Church, and they lent at interest on a large scale to monarchs—usually in connection with the latter's military purposes.

This last practice involved not inconsiderable risks: when Edward III of England defaulted on debts to the Bardi and Peruzzi companies which had been incurred in the course of his French wars, the collapse of those companies (which were exposed to the extent of fourteen times their share capital) so shook the prosperity of Florence that the town had difficulty maintaining its own military expenditure.⁶¹ Holmes rightly notes the apparent paradox

that the financial resources . . . of two private Florentine companies could exercise a decisive influence in the policy of the King of England while, about the same time, the commune of Florence placed itself under the government of a rather obscure French soldier of fortune, Walter of Brienne.⁶²

This is indeed a startling conjunction, and one moreover which is not much illuminated by considering the size of the political units involved. If it is true that 'in 1293 the maritime taxes of the single port of Genoa yielded 3½ times the entire royal revenues of the French monarchy',⁶³ then the geopolitical vulnerability of the city-states is not obviously explained by saying that they were 'small fry in the world of royal and seigniorial rivalries'.⁶⁴

Any adequate historical explanation must begin instead with the way in which the actual *political and geopolitical independence* of the Italian city-states was articulated with the *institutional separation of the processes of (agrarian) production and (urban) exchange* within European feudalism⁶⁵ as a whole.

To the 'territorial states' of the north, land was (almost) everything: productive labour, the source of their wealth, was (legally) rooted in it; and the political and military command over this labour was the currency of seigniorial power. To the city-states their territorial base was (almost) nominal. Of the Venetian it was said: *Non arat, non seminat, non vendemiat*.⁶⁶ While Florence, in the words of a near contemporary, was 'powerful more by the advantage of its location, the capacities of its men, and the readiness of its money than by the extent of its dominion'.⁶⁷ This is not of course to say that the towns did not have to secure the military and strategic

⁶⁰ Holmes, *Hierarchy*, 72. Braudel describes how 'all the international aspects of the Champagne fairs were controlled on the spot or at a distance by Italian merchants' (*Perspective*, p. 112), while Davis gives an instance of their more long-lived financial dominance: as late as the 16th century, 'At Lyon, the most important financial centre in the West, 143 out of 169 leading houses . . . were Italian' (Davis, *Economies*, p. 27).

⁶¹ Holmes, *Hierarchy*, pp. 68–9, Hay, *Europe*, p. 376.

⁶² Holmes, *Hierarchy*, p. 95.

⁶³ Anderson, *Passages*, p. 193.

⁶⁴ Holmes, *Hierarchy*, p. 96.

⁶⁵ Which itself, as Anderson notes, was made possible by the 'parcelisation of sovereignty' characterizing the feudal mode of production as a whole (*Passages*, p. 193).

⁶⁶ He ploughs not, he sows not, he reaps not (Braudel, *Perspective*, p. 108).

⁶⁷ Francesco Guicciardini, 1536, reprinted in J. B. Ross and M. M. McLaughlin (eds.), *The Portable Renaissance Reader* (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 280–1.

conditions of their survival; and this almost always necessitated local and foreign territorial expansion and, relatedly, the structural 'marriage of convenience' embodied in the rise of the *signori*. But their real location, the site where they reproduced themselves, was athwart the flows of exchange which serviced European feudalism and which carried their citizens into every major town and court of the continent.

Insinuated thus 'into the pores' of seigniorial power, Italian merchants could exercise considerable leverage based on their unique access to monetary flows⁶⁸—quite apart from the use-values which they supplied to the north.⁶⁹ And this role was undoubtedly enhanced by juridical and political autonomy at the centres of mercantile accumulation. (Italy had its own cautionary examples of steep urban decline under the heavy hand of Imperial or Angevin rule; and the Champagne fairs themselves met an unnatural end, strangled by the Dukes of Burgundy.⁷⁰)

But the same feudal separation of production and exchange which facilitated their penetration into the heartlands of seigniorial power and allowed them to amass half the traffic of the continent under their control without any significant northward territorial expansion—this same separation also threatened to prevent the cities from consolidating themselves geopolitically. Like the circuits of mercantile capital with which they ringed Europe, the Italian cities remained crucially 'penned in the sphere of circulation',⁷¹ relying heavily on external trade for their material reproduction—and in some cases 'circulating' large sections of their population throughout the continent.⁷² Thus although they were frequently at war, these wars were in general an adjunct to their commercial reproduction, fought to secure the conditions and expansion of trade. War was not, as it *was* for the feudal states, a primary mechanism of accumulation:

The State eluded a comparable military definition, because competition in trade and manufactures—escorted and enforced by extra-economic coercion, the 'protection costs' of the age—had become an economic purpose of the community in its own right: markets and loans were more important than prisoners, plunder was secondary to engrossment.⁷³

Moreover, because of this, because their extreme urban definition was precisely a measure of their necessary institutional subtraction from the rural feudalism which they serviced, territorial expansion was not a natural avenue of growth, and always carried the danger of providing geopolitical stability only at the price of republican

⁶⁸ One of the most dramatic (though slightly later) demonstrations of this came when the merchants of Genoa, which 'was constantly surrendering to other powers, either forcibly, voluntarily or out of prudence' (Braudel, *Perspective*, p. 158) imposed terms on the King of Spain: 'When in 1575, the king of Spain quarrelled with them and decided to do without their services, they succeeded in blocking the circulation of gold. The unpaid Spanish troops mutinied and sacked Antwerp in November 1576. And the king was eventually obliged to give in' (p. 168).

⁶⁹ These included not only textiles and eastern luxuries, but, in the case of Milan especially, a considerable quantity of weapons.

⁷⁰ Cf. Waley, *City-Republics*, p. 92, Adelson, *Commerce*, pp. 74 & 79–80 respectively.

⁷¹ Marx, *Capital* (London, 1959), III, chapter XX, 'Historical Facts About Merchant Capital', p. 325. The full sentence is worth reproducing: 'Since merchant's capital is penned in the sphere of circulation, and since its function consists exclusively of promoting the exchange of commodities, it requires no other conditions for its existence—aside from the undeveloped forms arising from direct barter—outside those necessary for the simple circulation of commodities and money.' This contrasts drastically with modes of *production*, feudal, capitalist etc. which require very extensive economic and political conditions for their existence.

⁷² See Waley, *City-Republics*, p. 23, who says that 'the population was certainly not rooted to its home city. In the case of the larger cities much involved in long-distance trade . . . a quite sizeable proportion of the adult male citizens must have been away on business'.

⁷³ Anderson, *Lineages*, p. 153.

autonomy. In practice, predominantly urban social orders of this kind, cut off from the wider seigniorial political command over resources of productive and military manpower, were historically unstable as independent states. Purchasing the military services of local feudatories thus became the prelude to accepting the takeover of Communal institutions by a noble landed family.

What was in many ways an intriguingly similar drama was later played out in the United Provinces of the sixteenth century. There the parts of the Commune, the *podesta* and the *signor* were played by the Estates-General, the *Stadholder* and the House of Orange. In any fuller study, this would form an important additional case—not least because it provided both (in Grotius) the theory of an international rule of law and (somewhat later, in William of Orange) a candidate (already schooled in the autonomy of Dutch political institutions) fit to smooth a crucial episode in the consolidation of the institutional autonomy of the English state.

Returning, then, to the questions posed in the Introduction above: Was the Italian balance the origin of our own international system? Is it true, as Mattingly suggests, that

Italy first found the system of organizing interstate relationship[s] which Europe later adopted, because Italy, towards the end of the Middle Ages, was already becoming what later all Europe became.⁷⁴

Any such claims would need to be severely qualified. In particular, the appearance of continuity with later Europe is in many respects an optical illusion. The image of the modern state-system beginning in Italy and then, through the collapse of the local balance of power, drawing in other states and thus becoming generalized to Europe as a whole, whence it later spread to cover the globe—this image is misleading. It is inadequate even on straightforward empirical grounds. There is an important 150 year gap between the resumption of major foreign intervention in Italy (1494—which Dehio marks as the start of the Europe-wide system) and the eventual construction of multilateral standing diplomacy at Westphalia in 1648. Closer inspection of this intervening period shows not only a fitful and restricted take-up of the Italian methods, but also a significant *regression* in the evolution of the diplomatic system in the ninety years leading up to Westphalia.⁷⁵ In the ‘international’ sphere, as in the development of its distinctive internal constitution, ‘the city-state proved a dead-end rather than the direct antecedent of the nation-state’.⁷⁶

This conclusion becomes inescapable when we turn to the structural and historical conditions of the Italian episode. The city-states indeed innovated ‘purely political’ geopolitical networks (culminating in standing diplomacy) just as they innovated many ‘purely economic’ ones (in the financial and commercial fields). The conditions of each were the same: a radical institutional separation of politics and economics premised upon a form of material reproduction dominated by exchange relations, itself contingent upon a geo-commercial/structural location within feudalism which enabled the cornering of such flows sufficient to support them. The very specificity of this role meant that it could not be generalized to Europe as a whole. To rework Mattingly’s formulation: for the cities to look like what all Europe would later become, they had to be released from the grip of seigniorial and Church power. But

⁷⁴ Mattingly, *Diplomacy*, p. 65.

⁷⁵ See Mattingly, *Diplomacy*, pp. 186–7.

⁷⁶ Waley, *City-Republics*, p. xvi.

there was a clear limit to how many Venices and Florences there were room for within Christendom. For Europe to undergo *its* transformation, Christendom had to be *destroyed*. This process would reach its climax in the century and a half which followed, producing a transformative crisis too in the underlying structural conditions of existing diplomatic institutions.⁷⁷ This is the unremarked historical content of the 150 year gap noted above in the continuity of diplomatic evolution. And it was not to be the work of merchant capital.

Greece

Peculiarities of the Greeks

The perception of 'the Greek city-state system' within IR has been a somewhat confused and contradictory one. On the one hand, the causes and prosecution of the Peloponnesian War are referred to as a *locus classicus* of the dynamics of the balance of power.⁷⁸ Thucydides is credited with being 'the first scientific student of international relations',⁷⁹ 'an early student of decision-making',⁸⁰ and the father of Realism—the latter often on account of his celebrated judgement that 'what made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta'.⁸¹ Furthermore, Thucydides' portrayals of public debates and diplomatic exchanges—most famously the Melian Dialogue⁸²—pursue with a startling faithfulness the logic of *realpolitik* familiar from the modern Realist theory of the state-system. So much is this so that in the Melian Dialogue itself—sometimes invoked as the prototypical contest of Realism and Idealism—both sides accept explicitly from the start that the issue will turn on the *public interests* of the parties involved.

On the other hand, the exemplary status of the Greeks suffers a dramatic downgrading at the hands of writers seeking to draw out their 'modern' character in greater historical detail. Wight concludes bluntly: 'Just as they had no diplomatic system and no public international law, so they had no sense of an equilibrium being the foundation and as it were the constitution of international society.'⁸³

To the evident disappointment of the English School, '[t]here was no Greek Grotius'.⁸⁴ Others too have been puzzled by a 'virtual absence of active theorizing

⁷⁷ Sabine's charge (p. 352) that Machiavelli misread the spirit of the age insofar as he advocated *raison d'état* on the eve of the Wars of Religion, is thus not wholly satisfactory: if these conflicts brought religion to the fore, it was precisely because they mediated the final collapse of Christendom and the rise of the secular state-system. Every confessional dispute, by receiving a secular settlement, itself became part of the emergence of the 'political state'. Thus Mattingly notes of the new doctrines of extraterritoriality which emerged in the 16th century: 'Probably the largest single factor in preparing men's minds to accept this extraordinary fiction was the embassy chapel question'. Something similar applies to the precept of *cuius regio eius religio*, another secular principle founded explicitly upon a reorganisation of religious authority. G. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (London, 1941), p. 352; Mattingly, *Diplomacy*, p. 266.

⁷⁸ See for example Waltz's comments reprinted in R. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York, 1986), p. 127.

⁷⁹ R. Gilpin in Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism*, p. 306.

⁸⁰ Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, *Contending Theories of International Relations* (New York, 1981), p. 469.

⁸¹ Thucydides, *History of The Peloponnesian War* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 49.

⁸² Thucydides, *History*, pp. 400ff. [5, 84–115].

⁸³ *Systems of States* (Leicester, 1977), p. 66.

⁸⁴ Butterfield and Wight, *Diplomatic Investigations*, p. 127.

about interstate relations' and have been led to speculate about treatises lost to posterity or the exhaustion of the collective Greek mind following its exertions in other areas.⁸⁵ The feebleness of such speculation, and of Wight's conclusion too, is readily apparent.⁸⁶ But the confusion is after all grounded in a genuine paradox. Purnell suggests that the lack of a developed theory of inter-state relations is partly the result of a 'habit of referring to actual city-states as a body of people rather than a named political unit'. This, he argues, 'limited the degree to which they could theorize about relations between states as such'.⁸⁷ But this apparent terminological blockage reflected not a theoretical incapacity but rather a widely recognized institutional reality: in classical Greece there *were* no 'states as such'. Anderson says of Athens:

There was scarcely any separate or professional state apparatus in the city, whose political structure was essentially defined by its rejection of specialised bodies of officials—civilian or military—apart from the ordinary citizenry: Athenian democracy signified, precisely, the refusal of any such division between 'state' and 'society'.⁸⁸

Realpolitik without states? Whence then derives that public discourse of *raison d'état* which is heard so clearly in the pages of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*? And how is it that the Greek *polis*, which in its underlying character could hardly have been more different from the Italian city-state of the Middle Ages, nonetheless bears such a striking resemblance to it? If we can answer these questions we will begin to penetrate the riddle of appearances on which the transhistorical claims of Realism are founded.

The comparison of the Italians with the ancient Greeks has of course been run many times,⁸⁹ and the first and most emphatic contrast to emerge concerns the absence in Greece of the role played by trade in medieval Italy. Not that trade was unimportant: among the key mechanisms of Athenian imperial power were the enforced use by subject cities of Athenian currency, and the maintenance of entrepôt.⁹⁰ But manufacturers for the most part 'had a purely internal significance, not connected with inter-state affairs';⁹¹ and even if one includes the corn trade, which seems to have accounted for the bulk of mercantile activity, 'the scale and total volume were small . . . even of the most highly urbanized communities like Athens'.⁹² Moreover, the traders and seafarers themselves were for the most part not citizens but

⁸⁵ For example, Robert Purnell, 'Theoretical Approaches to International Relations: The Contribution of the Graeco-Roman World', in T. Taylor (ed.), *Approaches and Theory in International Relations* (Harlow, 1978), pp. 19–20.

⁸⁶ As David Hume observed: 'the maxim of preserving the balance of power is founded so much on common sense and obvious reasoning that it is impossible it could altogether have escaped antiquity'. ('Of the Balance of Power', reproduced in Moorhead Wright (ed.), *Theory and Practice of the Balance of Power 1486–1914* (London, 1975), p. 189).

⁸⁷ Purnell, 'Approaches', p. 27–8. Sabine observes similarly: 'The modern distinction between the state and society is one which no Greek thinker made clearly and adequately' (*Political Theory*, p. 109).

⁸⁸ Anderson, *Passages*, p. 43.

⁸⁹ For example by Weber at some length in a section of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* reproduced as Martindale and Neuwirth (eds. & trans.), *The City* (New York, 1962) and more concisely by Anderson in *Lineages*, pp. 150–6.

⁹⁰ For the latter, see R. J. Hopper, *Trade and Industry in Classical Greece* (London, 1979), p. 74.

⁹¹ Hopper, *Trade*, p. 11.

⁹² M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Greeks* (London, 1963), p. 28. It seems also to be the case that the waves of colonization in the eighth and seventh centuries which created the multipolar Greek system were undertaken not in pursuit of trade but under the pressure of demographic and agrarian crisis in the early communities. See Finley, *Greeks*, pp. 26–7.

foreigners and *metics*, often granted considerable rights of passage and settlement but generally excluded from land-ownership.⁹³ Mercantile and craft activity were held in a low regard 'not unconnected with the servile status or ex-servile status of many of the practitioners of retail trades'.⁹⁴ Plato's ideal state of *The Laws* would have proscribed the involvement of citizens in trade, and Sparta actually did so, delegating its craft production and trading to the partly subject *poleis* of the *perioeci*.⁹⁵

Unlike the Italian republics then, the classical city-states remained 'in origin and principle, urban congeries of landowners'⁹⁶—forming paradoxically an urban civilization without an urban economy. The material and institutional conditions of this development derived not from tapping the flows of inter-regional exchange, but rather from the rural hyper-exploitation of captive labour: slavery. Considerable disagreement persists as to the quantitative and qualitative weight of slave labour in Greece. While Anderson suggests that slaves outnumbered the free in Periclean Athens by 3:2,⁹⁷ it is also the case that the heaviest concentrations were in mining and domestic service, while in agriculture freemen were more numerous.⁹⁸ Hence '[t]he view of Athens as a community of leisured citizens whose slaves greatly outnumbered the free is against the evidence'.⁹⁹ This, however, is not quite the point. Slavery 'released from any economic concern, or even activity, the men who gave political leadership to the state, and, in large measure, the intellectual leadership as well';¹⁰⁰ but crucially, it did so in a way which did not require the political subjection of fellow-citizens whatever polarisation of wealth might occur among them. Thus slavery was not just a source of material surpluses; by providing a continuing supply of cheap labour it acted also as a valve reducing the pressure on the economic independence of the smallholding class which was the precondition of political democracy. Slavery and democracy had in fact grown up together following the abolition of debt peonage by the reforming tyrannies of the sixth century. Fittingly enough, it seems that the first political democracy, Chios, was also the first significant importer of slaves.¹⁰¹ And '[t]he full exploitation of slaves in Hellenic territory fell in the blossom-time of democracy'.¹⁰²

One has only to compare the Funeral Oration of Pericles with the speech of the Venetian Doge on the resources of *his* city in 1421 (even granted the different occasions) to sense the enormous cultural gulf between the two civilizations, reflecting in turn the contrasted structural bases of their preeminence. Pericles' speech is a eulogy of public political institutions, while 'the most beautiful garden of Venice'¹⁰³ is the 2,800,000 ducats of annual trade with Lombardy.¹⁰⁴ These fundamental differ-

⁹³ See Hopper, *Trade*, p. 57. Philip Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge, 1984) suggests that by the fifth century BC there were perhaps 10,000 *metics* in Athens (p. 77).

⁹⁴ Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*, p. 65.

⁹⁵ Finley, *Greeks*, p. 78.

⁹⁶ Anderson, *Passages*, p. 19.

⁹⁷ Anderson, *Passages*, p. 22.

⁹⁸ Finley, *Greeks*, pp. 65–6.

⁹⁹ A. R. Burn, *The Pelican History of Greece* (Harmondsworth, 1982), p. 245.

¹⁰⁰ Finley, *Greeks*, p. 66.

¹⁰¹ See Finley, *Greeks*, p. 36, Anderson, *Passages*, p. 36.

¹⁰² Weber, *City*, p. 214.

¹⁰³ The Doge's speech is reprinted in Adelson, *Commerce*, p. 188–90.

¹⁰⁴ This comparison is perhaps less arbitrary than at first it appears, inasmuch as there is no evidence that Greek equivalents of the Doge's balance-sheet were systematically maintained: 'It is to be regretted that the Athenians, and indeed the Greeks in general, were so uninterested in economic statistics' (Hopper, *Trade*, p. 53). Tribute lists were a different matter.

ences can be elaborated to explore a range of sharp discontinuities between the Greek and medieval Italian cities: the *polis* knew nothing of the structural antagonism of town and country, pursued a militarist logic of accumulation alien to Italy, and so on.¹⁰⁵

Where the real institutional similarities none the less persist is in the forms of political organization. Pericles lays great stress on the rule of law and the juridical equality which it prescribes for the citizen body as an index of the achievement of Athens.¹⁰⁶ He expressed pride in the fact that his political influence was mediated by the Assembly, and not exercised by virtue of any formal executive authority.¹⁰⁷ And while the citizen-wide eligibility for office did not prevent political power from being largely the vocation of a wealthy, leisured minority, the latter were 'increasingly servants of the state, instruments of the law, and not arbitrary wielders of power'.¹⁰⁸ The language in which they addressed the Assembly was wholly of a piece with this:

The interests of the state were always justification enough, whether of war or of diplomacy and negotiation or of capitulation (if necessary even to the Persians). The choice of instruments in any given situation was arguable only on the question of tactics, pragmatically but not morally.¹⁰⁹

Again and again Thucydides gives witness of this in set piece debates—for example the Mytilenian Debate on the efficacy of mass capital punishment, where Cleon's opening hard line is countered not by moral objection but by Diodotus' subtler expediency.¹¹⁰ But what is this 'state' whose interests are invoked as paramount? As we have already noted, it does not have any existence other than the political self-organization of the citizenry.¹¹¹ It has no bureaucratic apparatus to which the decision-making authority of the populace is formally alienated and which might provide a basis of 'independent' interests and capacities. It is anything *but* autonomous in this restricted empirical sense. And yet it talks like a state! This suggests that the underlying constituents of *raison d'état* may lie elsewhere—not in the existence of a separate state organization but in a particular social relation among the population.

In Athens this was transparently so. In every sense, the democracy depended upon the institutional exclusion from the political sphere of those social relationships of juridical inequality (namely slavery and the *metic* status of trade) by which surplus extraction from direct producers and the security of small-holders in the face of commercial wealth were maintained. Thus, from the point of view of the population

¹⁰⁵ See Anderson, *Lineages*, pp. 150ff, where these points and others are fleshed out.

¹⁰⁶ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian*, p. 145. The Athenians went to the remarkable length of using Scythian slave police 'so that no citizen might have to lay violent hands upon another' (Burn, *History*, p. 239).

¹⁰⁷ See Burn, *History*, p. 213.

¹⁰⁸ Finley, *Greeks*, p. 33.

¹⁰⁹ Finley, *Greeks*, p. 56.

¹¹⁰ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian*, pp. 212–23. Diodotus says of the inhabitants of Mytilene whose fate is to be decided following the crushing of their revolt against Athens: 'I might prove that they are the most guilty people in the world, but it does not follow that I shall propose the death penalty, unless that is in your interests; I might argue that they deserve to be forgiven, but should not recommend forgiveness unless that seemed to me the best thing for the state . . . [T]his is not a law-court, where we have to consider what is fit and just; it is a political assembly, and the question is how Mytilene can be most useful to Athens.' [219–20]. Compare this with Anderson's observation that in feudalism 'justice . . . was the ordinary name of power' (*Passages*, p. 153)—i.e. political rule was legitimated and exercised via legal right ('privilege' in the sense used by Marx in the earlier discussion above) not common interest and the votes of political equals.

¹¹¹ 'There was no bureaucracy or civil service and despite the large numbers of officials, no hierarchy of offices—everyone being responsible solely to the *demos* itself' (Finley, *Greeks*, pp. 68–9).

as a whole 'civil society was the *slave* of political society'.¹¹² Among the citizen body however, the effect was to 'set free the political spirit': 'in Greece, the *res publica* is the real private affair of the citizens, their real content . . . the political state *qua* political state, being the true and only content of the life and will of the citizens'.¹¹³ For the citizenry, the political realm was, whatever divisions of wealth it encompassed, objectively the realm of their deeper common interest—truly a public sphere, albeit one whose structural conditions rendered it incapable of extension beyond a minority of the population. Within this sphere, a discourse of *raison d'état* could flourish because the formal equality of its members made it possible for issues to appear in their 'purely political' technical aspect. (This is not of course to imply substantive unity within Greek democratic assemblies, which were on the contrary, generally riven with the most vigorous factional strife—as indeed is the public sphere in 'open' societies today: the point is the existence of a public sphere at all.) But the referent and ground of this discourse was not a bureaucratic state organization; it was the nexus of internal and external social relations which produced and reproduced their ascendancy in the role of a 'purely political' elite. At the end of our long trail back through history in pursuit of the elemental category of Realist theory, we have arrived at an 'autonomy of the political' (e.g. the separating out of a distinct sphere of 'the political') without a state.

Excursus: causes of the Peloponnesian War

Before examining the implications of this for our understanding of the *modern* state, we might take this opportunity to assess briefly the claim that Thucydides provides a Realist explanation of the Peloponnesian War in terms of the balance of power.

As Doyle has argued, the Delian and Peloponnesian Leagues ranged against each other differed fundamentally in both the political complexion of the *poleis* involved and the mechanisms of interstate control which held them together. Athens had assumed leadership of the Delian League in 487 BC determined to press forward the expulsion of the Persians following the naval victory at Salamis and the freeing of Ionia. In this she was beckoned on not only by the opportunities for plunder, enslavement and colonization which attended each engagement; she also sought to secure the sea-routes for the corn imports from the Black Sea on which she was becoming increasingly dependent. (Athenian leadership took over from that of Sparta, which, by contrast, supplied most of its cereal needs from domestic production, and, for reasons detailed below, could ill afford large and prolonged military deployment abroad.¹¹⁴) The League began as a voluntary association to which each *polis* supplied an agreed 'tribute' of ships and men or money. It was transformed into an empire as the Athenians forcibly prevented secession (beginning with Naxos in 469), transferred the treasury from Delos to Athens (454), suppressed independent naval activity and assumed an ever closer supervision of the payment of the tribute. In its most developed form, this was accompanied by the arrogation to Athenian

¹¹² Marx, 'Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State', *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 138.

¹¹³ Same text, different translation: Marx, *Precapitalist Socio-Economic Formations* (Moscow, 1979), p. 29. For the alternative translation, see Marx, *Early Writings*, p. 91.

¹¹⁴ See Hopper, *Trade*, p. 74.

courts of all capital trials in member cities as well as the proliferation of Athenian currency minted from the silver mines at Laurium, and the maintenance of the port of Piraeus as a compulsory entrepôt for all Greek imports of corn from South Russia. The exercise of Athenian power facilitated by these arrangements took three principal forms: an effective naval monopoly permitting (in a predominantly coastal civilization) direct military sanctions against recalcitrant *poleis*; a political hegemony over allied democratic factions dependent on Athenian support against oligarchic revanchism; and a commercial supremacy which distributed the benefits of reduced piracy and a guaranteed currency while concentrating regulative authority. (Hopper observes that Athens 'learnt to use [her] control over corn and ship timber as instruments of domination over other states'. At the same time she could '... virtually close, for an individual, the majority of the Greek ports of importance in the eastern Mediterranean'.¹¹⁵)

It was otherwise in the Peloponnesian League, for reasons closely connected with the internal peculiarities of the Spartan *polis*. After a precocious early political development in the Archaic period, the evolution of the Spartan *polis* had arrested in a rigid oligarchic form which it was to retain for over 300 years. This was largely due to the fact that, whereas enslaved communities were normally dispersed on capture through the fully commodified slavery practised by *poleis* such as Athens, the Spartans had opted to exploit their subject populations in Laconia and Messenia *in situ*. The continuous occupation of these areas placed extreme military demands on the citizenry who organized themselves into a permanently mobilized army—a development finalized following the Second Messenian War of the third quarter of the seventh century. Thus, enigmatically, Sparta's 'great power' role arose out of her internal instability and remained connected with it: 'Her first and only unwavering concern was peace at home, in the Peloponnese. This she never fully achieved, but she came near enough through the instrumentality of the Peloponnesian League.'¹¹⁶ This inward orientation of the Spartans' policy, for which they were roundly criticized by their allies,¹¹⁷ is witnessed also by the fact that the League was not an empire, an interstate and 'transnational' mechanism for surplus accumulation at the metropole.¹¹⁸ Thucydides says that 'The Spartans did not make their allies pay tribute, but saw to it that they were governed by oligarchies who would work in the Spartan interest'.¹¹⁹ Nor was this interest pursued through the imposition of preferential trading arrangements. On the contrary, the oligarchies such as Sparta 'sought to avoid commercial contact in order to prevent the mobilisation of their democratically inclined middle and lower classes'.¹²⁰ Spartan military prowess, coupled with a fear of being undermined *domestically* by the influence of the politically more advanced *poleis* to the east—these were the principal forces which held the league of oligarchies together and made it the natural pole of attraction for Athens' other rivals too. The latter knew well how to play on the underlying conflict of social systems. '[Y]our whole way of life is out of date when compared to theirs', declared the Corinthian

¹¹⁵ Hopper, *Trade*, pp. 54 & 58 respectively.

¹¹⁶ Finley, *Greeks*, p. 80.

¹¹⁷ Notably the Corinthians. See Thucydides, *Peloponnesian*, pp. 73–7.

¹¹⁸ M. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, 1986), chapter 2, clearly distinguishes the mechanisms of Athenian and Spartan external power, calling the one imperial and the other hegemonic.

¹¹⁹ Doyle, *Empires*, p. 46.

¹²⁰ Doyle, *Empires*, p. 68.

delegates, goading the Spartan Assembly into war; 'Athens, because of the very variety of her experience, is a far more modern state than you are'.¹²¹ This was no revelation. Sparta found it difficult enough to live with Athens even when the latter was providing friendly military assistance: the Athenian army sent in response to Spartan requests for aid in putting down the *helot* revolt of 464 was sent home early for fear they might 'become the sponsors of some revolutionary policy'.¹²²

What then was 'the real reason for the war'? Was it the perceived tipping of the military and geopolitical scales between the two alliances threatened by the Athenian takeovers in Corcyra and Potidaea?¹²³ Or do these incidents, however central to the mechanisms of escalation, belong rather among those factors by which 'the real reason' is 'most likely to be disguised'? Was it the wider conflict of social systems which generated incompatible external needs?

Athens was securing her position in many of the subject cities by supporting democrats . . . against former governing classes . . . Conversely, there were unprivileged classes in some mainland states who looked longingly towards Athens. It was this which made it difficult for the two power-blocs, representing different social systems, to lie down together.¹²⁴

Or can it be grasped only by Thucydides' most comprehensive category of historical explanation, the 'uneven development' of Greece as a whole, as a result of which 'up to the present day much of Hellas still follows the old way of life',¹²⁵ with all the strains and intercommunal tensions which followed from this?

Whatever the answer, one thing at least must be allowed: when Thucydides describes 'the real reason' as 'the growth of Athenian power', he does not, *could* not, mean geopolitical power on the modern realist definition—the fungible, strictly interstate, transhistorically generic medium of the 'balance of power'. For on his own account, the Athenian threat comprised qualitatively distinct forms of influence and control which Sparta could not reproduce, even in smaller quantities.¹²⁶ Moreover, its external geopolitical advance was inseparable from the sociopolitical vulnerability which it compounded within the Spartan *polis*. In other words, we find here neither a common structural definition to the forms of geopolitical power exercised by the two alliances, nor a distinct terrain of inter-state politics whose dynamics could be analysed *sui generis*. Given this, it becomes difficult to see what 'the balance of power' as an explanatory tool (rather than as a piece of descriptive shorthand) could refer to except purely military logics of escalation. And no one, least of all Thucydides, would reduce the causes of the Peloponnesian War to those.

Restored to its original context, Thucydides' famous one-liner is emphatically *not* an instance of a substantive Realist explanation. This ought to be evident from the fact that it occurs in Book I of his *History* as the *preface* to actual historical explanation, not at the end as a summary of its content. And in any case, when the

¹²¹ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian*, p. 77.

¹²² Thucydides, *Peloponnesian*, p. 95. See also Burn's treatment of this incident, *History*, pp. 210–11.

¹²³ 'Potidaea', the Corinthians protested, 'is the best possible base for any campaign in Thrace, and Corcyra might have contributed a very large fleet to the Peloponnesian League' (Thucydides, *Peloponnesian*, p. 74).

¹²⁴ Burn, *History*, p. 261. Of the 150 odd *poleis* in the Athenian empire, all but three were, or were obliged to become, democracies. See Doyle, *Empires*, p. 56.

¹²⁵ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian*, pp. 36 & 38.

¹²⁶ As Doyle puts it: 'Athenian power was not only large relative to any one of its subordinate allies in the Delian League, it was also different from that of Sparta and different from, and not just larger than, that of the subordinate allies' (*Empires*, p. 65).

meaning of 'power' is fleshed out, it violates several of the key premises of Realist method. A balance of power explanation here is either substantively incorrect or a mere banality—a double failure which, it can be argued, is the recurrent fate of Realism as a social theory.¹²⁷ Despite the chorus of assent, there is in fact no warrant to conclude that 'Thucydides belongs to the Realists . . .'¹²⁸

Conclusions: structural conditions of *raison d'état*

The Greek and Italian city-state systems were both, in their different ways, 'one-off' anomalies in the run of European history—incapable, despite their tremendous political and cultural creativity, of being generalized into a wider system. If the Commune was, as Waley suggests, 'a dead-end', the *polis* 'required so rare a combination of material and institutional circumstances that it . . . could be approximated only for a very brief period of time . . . it had a past, a fleeting present and no future'.¹²⁹ Why then do they appear so familiar to the modern international system which, by contrast, has achieved a fully global reach? This question is perhaps best approached via Marx's analysis, discussed above, of the structural conditions of the capitalist 'purely political' state.

It will be recalled how Marx (in Volume III of *Capital*) located the cutting edge of historical materialism as a method in historical sociology:

The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled . . . It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers . . . which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state.¹³⁰

Capitalism is unique as a mode of production in that this relationship assumes a 'purely economic' form. That is to say, the 'specific economic form' is profit valorised through a series of relations of exchange, rather than tribute (in money or kind) extracted through direct political relations of domination. The commodification of labour-power which lies at the heart of this sudden and unprecedented ubiquity of exchange relations ('the market') does not cancel the actual subjection of the direct producer. Rather it reconstitutes it, through the structured inequality of the labour contract, within a privatised realm of production where it is maintained via the direct material dependence of a free (e.g. propertyless and untied) workforce. We should therefore be careful not to mistake the formal separation of politics and economics (or state and civil society) under capitalism for a substantive evacuation of relations of domination from the realm of production.¹³¹ Nevertheless, because this 'strategic

¹²⁷ This argument is developed at length in J. Rosenberg, 'What's the Matter with Realism', *Review of International Studies*, 16 (1990), especially pp. 294–6.

¹²⁸ M. Doyle, 'Thucydidean Realism', *Review of International Studies*, 16 (1990), p. 237.

¹²⁹ Finley, *Greeks*, p. 88.

¹³⁰ Marx, *Capital* (Moscow, 1959), III, p. 791.

¹³¹ See Ellen Wood, 'The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism', *New Left Review* 127 (May/June 1981), for an illuminating exploration of these pitfalls. Incidentally, it might be argued in this context that Gramsci chased the wil'-o'-the-wisp of 'power' back and forth across the modern institutional frontier between state and civil society so many times that it finally became unclear whether his intellectual legacy was one of social revolution or social democracy. See Anderson's 'The Antimonies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review*, 100 (1976/7), especially the section entitled 'Illusions of Left Social-Democracy', pp. 27–9.

relationship¹³² is held in place by private 'economic' sanctions (unemployment) rather than by the exercise of jurisdiction (coercively upheld legal rights of exploitation as under feudalism), *political* inequality is not inscribed in the relations of production—whereas it is for all precapitalist modes of production.¹³³ This is why the realm of 'the political' emerges both as institutionally discrete, and as potentially the domain of universal interests. In *The German Ideology*, Marx summarized this in an epigrammatic punning formula: 'the modern state . . . is based on *freedom of labour*'.¹³⁴ Once again, the formal separation should not confuse us—this time into thinking that this 'purely political' 'autonomous' state is a self-sufficient, trans-historically viable form of rule. It is not:

The abstraction of the *state as such* belongs only to modern times, because the abstraction of private life belongs only to modern times. The abstraction of the *political state* is a modern product.¹³⁵

But if modern state autonomy is structurally specific to capitalism, what does it retain in common with Italy and Greece? Much and little. As we have seen, in all three cases, the opening out of a public sphere rests upon a formal political equality among the citizen body. In each case too, the condition of this formal equality is the exclusion from the mutual relations of the citizenry of political mechanisms of surplus appropriation. It is this which allows the emergence of institutions of political governance which are *both* potentially autonomous of factional interest (e.g. 'purely political') *and yet* uniquely an expression of the structural and historical identity of the society whose determinate conditions of reproduction they can have no higher aim than to secure and promote. As the Athenians accurately put it: 'The law is king'¹³⁶—meaning both that *law* rules and that *the laws* (the constitution) are the highest moral end of public life. The Italians averred the same when they upheld the municipal law of the Empire even after the repulse of Hohenstauffen power from the peninsula: 'When the Emperor was no longer recognised as superior, his place was taken by the law'.¹³⁷ But how is it that in each of our three cases, political mechanisms of surplus appropriation, which are unquestionably the dominant form in human history, are excluded? Here we find a crucial difference: for capitalism is the only one in which this condition of the emergence of a discrete sphere of 'the political' is actually *internal* to the mode of production.

In capitalism the domain of formal political equality does not need to be a segregated realm of privilege resting upon surplus extraction elsewhere in the wider social formation. Or, at any rate, this 'elsewhere' is but another dimension of the lives of the same individuals: so far as the direct producer is concerned, the capitalist labour contract is free and equal 'on the outside' but unfree and unequal within. (Marx's best-known formulation of this is his contrast of the 'heaven' of political citizenship with the 'earth' of capitalist socio-economic relations.¹³⁸) To call the

¹³² As E. Wolf calls it in *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley, 1982), chapter 2.

¹³³ See Anderson's discussion of this in the 'Conclusions' to *Lineages*.

¹³⁴ In other words, 'freedom' in both senses. (Reproduced in Sayer (ed.), *Readings*, p. 122.)

¹³⁵ Sayer (ed.), *Readings*, p. 116.

¹³⁶ See Finley, *Greeks*, p. 49.

¹³⁷ See Sereni, *International Law*, p. 14.

¹³⁸ See the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: 'just as the Christians are equal in heaven, but unequal on earth, so the individual members of the nation are *equal* in the heaven of their political world, but unequal in the earthly existence of *society*' (Sayer (ed.), *Readings*, p. 120). In Italy and Greece, 'heaven' and 'earth' also exist but do not share the same membership. Their co-extension in capitalist societies makes modern citizenship problematic in ways quite foreign to Italy or Greece.

outside 'public/political' and the inside 'private/economic/civil' obscures as much as it reveals about the character and interconnection of the social relations involved. As Ellen Wood points out,

the differentiation of the economic and the political in capitalism is, more precisely, a differentiation of political functions themselves and their separate allocation to the private economic sphere and the public sphere of the state. This allocation reflects the separation of political functions immediately concerned with the extraction and appropriation of surplus labour from those with a more general communal purpose . . . the differentiation of the economic is in fact a differentiation within the political sphere.¹³⁹

This is indeed more accurate than the designation above of the capitalist mechanism of surplus appropriation as 'purely economic', a description which is always in danger also of lending credence to the misleading definition of capitalism solely in terms of the complex of exchange relations which it presents to public (in both technical and ordinary usages) view. None the less once these limitations to any discussion of a 'purely political' realm are accepted, it remains valid and instructive to note how the conditions of the emergence of the latter in Italy and Greece differed from those obtaining in modern capitalist societies.

As already suggested, in both earlier cases these conditions arose externally to the political community involved. This is most obviously the case with the Italian Commune, where interregional trade provided the all-important supplement to local agrarian surpluses. The freedoms of the Commune depended on the wider unfreedom of agrarian labour in Europe and the east; for, as Marx noted, the targets of interregional mercantile activities in the precapitalist period are the surpluses already appropriated and held by superordinate groups in the foreign societies between which the traders' activities mediate.¹⁴⁰ (What was specific to the city-states was the additional, geopolitical dimension which they lent to this structural separation of production and exchange.) Unlike the *polis*, the Italian city-state evolved a real urban economy, but an unrepeatable one resting on its location within the wider agrarian formation: its political antagonism towards the feudal countryside thus did not reflect any overall transformative capacity comparable to that of its capitalist successor. But in Greece too, it was the admixture of slavery alongside (but institutionally outside) the dominant mode of production which provided the basis for 'the separation of political functions immediately concerned with the extraction and appropriation of surplus labour from those with a more general communal purpose'.¹⁴¹ Greece too was 'freakish' in this regard; and this makes it apparent that in both cases the external conditions enabling the emergence of a distinct political sphere *themselves* set internal structural limits to its expansion and hence generalisability.¹⁴² In Italy the public

¹³⁹ Wood, 'Separation', p. 82.

¹⁴⁰ Marx, *Capital*, III, p. 331. In this connection, Marx also observed: 'So long as merchant's capital promotes the exchange of products between undeveloped societies, commercial profit not only appears as outbargaining and cheating, but also largely originates from them.' [*ibid.* p. 330]. The Greeks, for their part, mapped out the complex relations involved in a different, but hardly less penetrating idiom: Hermes, the god of trade, was also the patron of (among other things) messengers, boundary stones—and thieves.

¹⁴¹ Wood, 'Separation', p. 82.

¹⁴² To these structural limits we can also add some more circumstantial, though no less real, impediments to any generalization of the Greek or Italian systems. Among these are the restrictions on geographical and demographic scale due to the need for face to face contact in a pre-industrial participatory polity, and relatedly the unique facilitating role of the Mediterranean Sea as a medium of communication in both civilisations. These observations should not, however, license a fetishising of technology: after all, the emergence of agrarian capitalism in England *preceded* the Industrial Revolution.

sphere was bordered 'horizontally' by (and depended upon) the surrounding feudal rural institutions; in Greece, its delineation was the 'vertical' one of citizenship versus slavery. And because in both cases the city was the locus and mechanism of the political sphere, the differences between them (and those which set the modern world apart again) can be expressed by tracing the modulation in the overall relationship of town and country, as indeed Marx indicated in the *Grundrisse*:

Ancient classical history is the history of cities, but cities based on landownership and agriculture . . . the Middle Ages . . . starts with the countryside as the locus of history, whose further development then proceeds through the opposition of town and country; modern (history) is the urbanisation of the countryside, not, as among the ancients, the ruralisation of the city.¹⁴³

We cannot leave this discussion without suggesting briefly what lines of further research are indicated for theories of the international system. Two related avenues suggest themselves immediately: extending the critique of the Realist theory of the state to cover its conception of the state-system; and demystifying the institutional forms of contemporary international power. A single example may serve to illuminate what might be involved in both directions.

The twentieth century has witnessed, among many other things, both the end of colonialism *and* a significant contraction of the developed, privileged core of the world economy. (Hobsbawm, reckoning the latter as a proportion of the world's population, estimates a decline from 33 per cent to 15 per cent between 1900 and 1990.¹⁴⁴) At the very least it will be accepted that the achievement of formal sovereign equality between states has streaked far ahead of any prospect of material equality between populations—even in the provision of basic human needs. The United Nations as an organization is emblematic of this paradox. Is then the sovereign equality which it proclaims an indictment of the hollowness of formal political rights, or is it a sign of hope—a potential lever of universal future advances?¹⁴⁵ Ultimately, of course, this question will admit only of historical answers. But our discussion above does enable us to go beyond the despairing cynicism or rootless utopianism which it usually provokes. For we can see that sovereign equality and the right of self-determination are attended by the same combination of genuine, hard-won achievement and cruel ironies of dispossession which has dogged the struggle for the juridical equality and political freedom of the individual within the liberal democratic state.

This is because the two realms (domestic and international) manifest common structural properties given by their shared capitalist identity: in the international sphere too, the absolute character of the political right of self-determination (like the freedom of labour/the individual) may be seen to hinge precisely upon its substantive permeability by other, 'non-political' mechanisms of surplus appropriation. Capitalism is the only historical system which permits the exploitation of productive labour

¹⁴³ *Precapitalist Economic Formations* (London, 1964), pp. 78–9.

¹⁴⁴ 'Goodbye to All That', *Marxism Today*, October 1990, p. 21.

¹⁴⁵ One suspects that advocates of 'the critical turn in international theory', insofar as they seek to ground their anticipations in contemporary political realities, would indicate such a possibility as crucial. This, however, is speculative, since these writers persistently shy away from identifying concrete historical agencies of change at the international level. See, for example, Linklater's discussion of Habermas in *Beyond Realism and Marxism: Critical Theory and International Relations* (London, 1990), especially pp. 26–7.

under an alien jurisdiction. But, as we have already seen, the 'privatizing' of surplus appropriation which allows this is at the same time the 'abstracting' of the state as a 'purely political' public institution. The possibility of an international economy is thus structurally interdependent with the possibility of a sovereign state-system. At the institutional level, however, this same interdependence manifests itself precisely as a *separating out* of international politics and international economics.¹⁴⁶

The community of nations too thus has its public 'heaven' (the sovereign state-system) and its private 'earth' (the transnational global economy). To put it in these terms is not to indicate a ready-made causal model capable of automatically producing explanations of historical outcomes. The point is not that 'earth determines heaven' in the manner of the vulgar marxist formulations which have for so long been the butt of easy criticism. It is that these institutional realms are no more capable of being understood separately from each other than are their equivalents 'within' the state, discussed in the body of this paper above. Thus if we set out to construct a theory of international politics, it is futile to proceed from the Realist idea of a generic state-system (studied by IR) on the one hand, and a global economy of market relations (studied by Economics) on the other—the two spheres reciprocally linked by a set of causal relationships constituting the further field of International Political Economy. Rather, at this level too we must explore what is involved in seeing the essence of capitalism not as the separation of politics and economics which it presents to view, but as 'a differentiation within the political sphere'.

It should be added that to speak of a capitalist state-system is not to foreclose the associated historical debates concerning the dynamics and agency of socio-political development and transformation, either in early modern Europe or elsewhere: on the contrary, even in England, the social relations we have been discussing did not emerge suddenly and fully-fledged but rather evolved, often bloodily, in the course of several centuries. And if it makes sense to describe the modern international system as capitalist, this is not because all its members are assumed to have followed the same path; it is because its dominant institutions have been shaped by liberal states in a way that facilitates the international exercise of capitalist social power. To explore theoretically the capitalist character of this system is indeed to trace the specificity of the dominant modern form of international power. But the contingent historical processes by which this sovereign state-system came into being, and by which it continues to develop and to be reproduced by real living individuals—these processes remain to be recounted and explained. History, hence the need for historical explanation, does not end. In this respect, the conclusions reached here do nothing more than probe the broadest contours of an alternative, non-Realist terrain of IR theory.

On the other hand, even at this range they may throw some light on the paradox of universal sovereign equality overseeing a global deepening of material inequality—the paradox summed up in the United Nations Organization. For they suggest that to regard the UN either as a failure for not actualising substantive international rights (sometimes known as social and economic rights), or as in principle limited only by the collective will of its members in its potential as an agent of universal interests—

¹⁴⁶ Conversely, this suggests why sovereignty could not be admitted as a doctrine of external relations in the feudal world, where territorial expansion premised upon labour tied to land was the key mechanism of intra-seigniorial accumulation—and why it remained moot and unrealized within the Soviet system.

that both these conclusions implicitly misread the specificity of political institutions under capitalism. For the very possibility of sovereign equality is, as we have seen, dependent on the abstraction of the purely political state-system which creates the realm of private transnational power (the world market) in which, in turn, the material inequality is reproduced.

Thus even if, for the sake of argument, all the world's governments were political democracies and the UN constituted a world assembly wielding executive authority determined by majority voting, there is no special reason to believe that it would become the irresistible protagonist of 'economic rights', if this means instituting a planned development which suppresses the complex operation of the world market. This kind of thinking once promoted the delusion (on both right and left) that capitalism would be overwhelmed by universal suffrage.

This does not mean that progressive international political or redistributive advances cannot be achieved via the UN—any more than one would wish undone the political and material benefits of social democracy in Western Europe. But if our historical review teaches us anything, it is that democracy, slogan of our epoch, has no determinate content until its structural conditions are specified. Its historical definition always requires that we extend our focus beyond the self-definition of the political realm. In the case of our other historical examples, this revealed an insurmountable dependence upon forms of political unfreedom elsewhere in the social formation. In the case of the modern international system, *sovereign* equality may be seen to rest on conditions ('economic' unfreedoms) which set internal limits that capitalism is structurally incapable of transcending.¹⁴⁷ Paradoxical this may seem; inexplicable it is not: 'The representative system is a very specific product of modern bourgeois society which is as inseparable from the latter as is the isolated individual of modern times.'¹⁴⁸

And this, it should be clear, is not a conspiracy theory, or an 'economic reductionism': it is a straightforward argument about the determinacy and effectivity of social structure.

At first sight, the remarkable institutional similarities between the Classical, Renaissance and modern state-systems do indeed seem to offer the basis for a transhistorical theory of state-systems *sui generis*, which can be elaborated fully at the interstate level in terms of the distinctive discourse of *raison d'état* common to all three. It is no wonder therefore that many Realists look to Italy as the dawn of the modern system and to Classical Greece as evidence of the timelessness of those properties which they single out as *sui generis* and hence the starting point of their theory of the modern state-system. On closer inspection, however, this transhistorical continuity resolves into a gigantic optical illusion: for it becomes apparent first that in reality the three systems are utterly different in character, second that in no case (least of all the causes of the Peloponnesian War) can an adequate explanation of actual historical outcomes be derived solely at the interstate level, and third that the very appearance of a self-sufficient purely political realm *itself* rests upon an *internal* (and in each case different) structural configuration of social relations. Once these

¹⁴⁷ For a sympathetic critique of one attempt to square this circle (e.g. to promote capitalist representative government as the lever of a wider realisation of democracy), see P. Anderson, 'The Affinities of Norberto Bobbio', *New Left Review*, 170 (July/August 1988).

¹⁴⁸ *The German Ideology*, reprinted in Sayer (ed.), *Readings*, p. 130.

differentia specifica are isolated, they provide an alternative and surer starting point from which to explore the historical character of the geopolitical systems concerned.

Dispelling an optical illusion is not always a straightforward affair: for it is necessary not only to show how reality has been distorted but also to explain why the illusion recurrently arises. And the task is still not complete until an alternative explanation is fully elaborated which can be seen to illuminate more about the social processes and outcomes under view. But that even the preliminary conclusions reached here constitute an advance on Realism is surely not to be doubted. For Realism is not only incapable of identifying, let alone explaining, the optical illusion: it positively embraces it, and elevates it to the level of a general theory embodying the acknowledged common sense of the age. This self-confidence lends Realism a resilience far greater than its intellectual credentials could warrant. But then, international relations would hardly be the first discipline in which basic theoretical advances have needed to be made in the face of common sense.